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Comptroller meets fire volunteers

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Taking a closer look at the cost efficiency of local volunteer fire companies may be politically risky, but Erie County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz believes his recent report “stirring the pot” of fire protection is a worthwhile gamble.

That’s what he told a standing-room-only gathering in the Jamison Road Fire Company in Elma.

The meeting was called by the six-member Republican Caucus of the Erie County Legislature as a way for volunteer firefighters to “get their voices heard” and questions answered about Poloncarz’s “Review of Fire Protection Within Erie County,” which was released last month.

“Maybe it is political suicide for me to do this, but I think it needs to be discussed,” said Poloncarz, defending his 16-page report before a hostile audience. “My report is basically to stir the pot.”

That comment was met with groans from the crowd mainly consisting of area fire chiefs and commissioners.

“I think there’s a lot of inaccuracies in there,” said John R. Wicka, commissioner of the Lake View Fire District in Hamburg. “Walk in our shoes for a while and then look at that report again.”

Wicka took exception to a chart in the appendix of the report that detailed a per-call cost for each fire department. He also pointed out that state mandates account for signifi-

cant costs in each fire company’s budget and that volunteers aren’t “adverse to change” but it has to be change that “meets the needs of our community.”

Poloncarz admitted there’s a lot the report does not cover — such as response time — but added that’s why his chief recommendation is for the county to apply for state funding to launch an independent examination of county fire protection.

He quickly quelled rumors that the report called for a “county takeover” of fire protection or that volunteers should be replaced by paid firefighters.

“The report was an examination of the costs,” he said. “We wanted to look at costs associated with it to see where consolidation would make sense.”

Consolidating in areas with decreasing populations and where companies have difficulty recruiting new members are two ideas, he said.

The changing demographics of Erie County, the Democratic comptroller admitted, may even require the addition of firehouses in some growing suburbs.

His recommendations also included:

Requiring all fire companies to have a Web site that posts annual budgets and tax levies for public review.

An option for budgetary control over fire protection by town boards.

Coordinated purchasing of equipment by adjacent fire districts to minimize duplication.

Minority Leader John J. Mills, R-Orchard Park, criticized the report for not adequately polling members of the fire service before it was compiled.

That’s one reason, Mills said, the Republican caucus felt it necessary to hold Wednesday’s meeting.

“You can’t just throw things out there — there’s too much at stake,” Mills said. “The bottom line is, do your homework. It hasn’t been done here.”

Legislator Raymond W. Walter, R-Amherst, said he wasn’t sure investigating the county-wide fire service is “the best use of the comptroller’s time.” But he said he looked forward to getting opinions of volunteers.

“This is an important piece of the puzzle that missing from the comptroller’s report, and it’s the people this affects that most,” Walter said.

Elma Supervisor Michael Nolan, a 27-year veteran of the Jamison Road Volunteer Fire Company, branded the report “offending” to fire service personnel.

“Fire services are certainly best at the local level. The decisions made are best made by volunteers,” Nolan said. “We need to keep public safety separate from politics.”

Comments

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